Social justice issues for school practitioners

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Focusing School Leadership on Poverty and Ethnicity for K-12 Student Success

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Diane Wells River, Omaha Public Schools  
Anthony J. Weers, Westside High School, Omaha NE  
Amy Welch, Omaha Central High School

To be successful, school leaders promote change, innovation, and creativity in the development of school structures and climates to educate the most diverse group of students ever seen in U.S. schools (CCSSO, 2008). School administrators are responsible for improving teaching, learning, and student achievement at all levels of public and private education; therefore, aspects of social justice that provide opportunities for all students should be at the core of research by school leaders. The impact of poverty and ethnicity on student success, including specific efforts to improve literacy, advising, technology, student placement and scheduling are all areas of focus. This chapter explores doctoral studies through the lens of social justice to determine how dissertations support preparing candidates for the diverse environments where they work.

Horace Mann saw education as an absolute right when he said, “Education then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance-wheel of the social machinery” (Mann, 1846). Mann credits the American education system as leading the United States to become an economic, cultural and social world leader (Herrick, 2010). Obstacles to success of children in school are prevalent
and include both poverty and ethnicity. However, university programs do not typically address teaching social justice in their leadership programs. While they address and emphasize diversity and equity, they stop short of emphasizing the mechanisms that promote social justice (Hafner, 2006).

DEVELOPING SOCIOCULTURAL CONSCIOUSNESS

While American educators today are serving an increasingly diverse community, educators themselves are predominately, middle class and White, European American, English—only speakers (Banks et al., 2005; Jazdar & Algozzine, 2006; Swartz, 2003). Dispositions are the “values, commitments, and professional ethics that influence behaviors toward students, families, colleagues, and communities” (NCATE, 2008, p. 53). An educator’s knowledge of diversity dispositions is founded in self-awareness which includes the skills, beliefs, and connections to be successful within the community (Schulte, Edwards, & Edick, 2008). Sociocultural consciousness is “the awareness that a person’s world view is not universal, but is profoundly influenced by life experiences” (Villegas & Lucas, 2007, p.31) An educator who does not possess this awareness relies upon and overuses their own experiences, and often misinterprets the communication and behaviors of students and other adults (Dantas, 2007). Awareness of positive dispositions and the ability to put them into action is critical for school leaders. Within Educational Leadership programs we must provide opportunities for leaders to examine and reflect on the meaning of their cultural background, their skin color, and their belief systems as well as the relationship between these attributes and their personal and professional practice (Parker & Shapiro, 1992).

DEVELOPING COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

How do future school leaders transform understanding into action? Theoretical knowledge is clearly not sufficient to change teachers’ sociocultural assumptions (Dantas, 2007). Through service learning, students gain experience to use the foundation of learning (Butin, 2003; Fall, 2006). Service learning can foster respect for diversity, awareness of social concerns, and a sense of ethics and civic engagement (Coles, 1993). Because of the emotional component of the community service, students perceive this active learning as being long lasting and significant (Wittmer, 2004).

ALIGNING BELIEFS WITH ACTIONS

A disconnect between beliefs and actions can be described as the *The Knowing-Doing Gap* (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000). This gap can occur when individuals or organizations substitute talking for action, fall back on what is comfortable, fear change and focus intensely on short term measurements, like adequate yearly progress, or rely on internal competition. Not surprisingly, many of these play out in our public school systems. Individuals and organizations maintain their current beliefs and practices even when strong efforts are made to change them. Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) suggest that when uncovering a knowing-doing gap, it was “clear that knowing what to do was not enough. It was clear that being smart was not enough to turn knowledge in to practice. It was evident that reading, listening to, thinking, and writing smart things were not enough” (p. ix). Therefore, it
becomes the role of the university instructor to help create opportunities for leadership candidates to face these challenges, perhaps appeal an emotional connection and help the student actively confront them. Elements used to create an intentional sociocultural environment for active learning include:

1. Balance the emotional and cognitive components of the learning process.
2. Acknowledge and support the personal—in this case the student’s experience—while illuminating the systemic.
3. Attend to social relations within the classroom.
4. Utilize reflection and experience as tools for student-centered learning.
5. Value awareness, personal growth, and change as outcomes of the learning process.
6. Most significantly, change is more likely to occur because of a truth that influences feelings than an analysis that shifts their thinking. (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997)

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Being culturally proficient enables future school leaders to address issues of diverse school cultures. We believe that those who are culturally proficient “welcome and create opportunities to better understand who they are as individuals, while learning how to interact positively with people who differ from themselves” (Robins, Lindsey, Lindsey, & Terrell, 2006, p 4-5). The core values of cultural proficiency are: cultural is a predominant force----you cannot NOT be influenced by culture; people are served in varying degrees by the dominant culture; people have group identities that they want to have acknowledged; cultures are not homogeneous—there is diversity within groups; the unique needs of every culture must be respected. (Robins, Lindsey, Lindsey, & Terrell, 2006)

Future school leaders must be given opportunities to engage in conversations with others about social justice in order to solidify their own beliefs. Furthermore, they need an opportunity to engage in authentic practice within culturally diverse settings (Barnes, 2006; Guerra & Nelson, 2007; Hafner, 2006; Howard & Del Rosairo, 2000). A doctorate includes completion of a dissertation that demonstrates the students’ ability to write, and conduct and defend research. Writing a dissertation is personal transformative experience and can be a peak experience (Roberts, 2004). Abraham Maslow (1968) refers to life-fulfilling moments as, “moments of highest happiness and fulfillment” (p.73) and adds, “a peak experience is felt as a self-validating, self-justifying moment which carries its own intrinsic value with it” (p.79). Therefore the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore ways in which the dissertation journey can lessen the knowing-doing gap of social justice for school leaders.
METHODOLOGY

The researchers used a general qualitative methodology for this study. Data were drawn from dissertations written by students who have recently graduated. In essence, researchers reviewed dissertations from school leaders that explored social justice for overarching themes. Examples that articulated or illustrated students overcoming this knowing-doing gap were then shared.

This study took place at a university located in the Midwest where the demographics in the public schools are changing dramatically, and often very rapidly. As a result, faculty in the Educational Leadership department are compelled to address sociocultural consciousness, cultural proficiency, and community connections with students in an authentic, intentional and developmental manner in order to promote measurable growth in knowledge, skills and dispositions of diversity. Leadership students are required to complete nine or more hours of community service in a wide variety of settings from homeless shelters to disaster relief fundraisers. Leadership students write reflection papers that specifically target how the project has enhanced their skills and dispositions as a leader and how their work was important for the community they were serving.

Educational Leadership at our institution addresses this through a semester of School Community Relations class, where students develop cultural proficiency through reading, lecture and guest speakers, and being involved in group and individual activities, as well as, discussion and reflection. Doctoral students are deeply engaged in developing cultural proficiency in their field work as well as during two significant courses within the doctoral program: The Culture and Context of School and Paradigms and Practices in Schools. Both of these courses include field work and significant study in cultural proficiency. Along with the guiding principles, future leaders build cultural proficiency through experiencing the tools to develop cultural competence, the continuum for seeing and responding to difference, and the essential elements as well as barriers to creating a foundation of positive behaviors and practices within themselves, their schools and the diverse community (Keiser, 2008).

Because of the keen focus on Social Justice in our mission our dissertations all have a strong element of social justice. For this study, we chose dissertations that examined work in a variety of settings in order to help the reader understand the impact of this effort. In the pages that follow, you will see a presentation of social justice through the eyes of our doctoral students in a variety of settings in urban, rural and suburban places. The students’ topics specifically address poverty and ethnicity in these settings. The work that they display in their dissertations is a reflection of what has become ingrained in their leadership through a targeted effort to increase their cultural proficiency.

FINDINGS: SOCIAL JUSTICE THROUGH THE EYES OF DOCTORAL STUDENTS

How does social justice manifest itself within doctoral work and especially within the dissertation? As we examined student work, there were two major themes that emerged: (1) poverty and (2) ethnicity. Within these themes we discovered that our students clearly
displayed the core values of cultural proficiency and culture is a predominant force and was emphasized in their dissertation work. We also found that the students very clearly understood that cultures were not homogenous. Uniqueness was apparent and discoverable whether the writing was about rural poverty or urban gifted African American males. Our students not only acknowledged the theoretical frameworks that they have been taught about sociocultural consciousness but, they also put action behind their knowledge. In the section that follows, we have provided a brief review of the literature on poverty and then share from three student dissertations that focused on poverty. We then provide a brief review of the literature on ethnicity, and share from two selected student dissertations that focused on ethnicity.

**Poverty – Literature Review**

Many students in public school systems have varied backgrounds and diverse experiences in their young lives. Educators are often from middle class backgrounds and are unfamiliar with the conditions of students’ lives (Herrick, 2010). Further, many teachers do not have a full understanding of the values, routines, and daily interactions of many students who live in poverty (Payne, 2005). Some families seem to have it all, including the tools and how to be successful in school, yet some seem to have nothing at all.

For children living in poverty, the capacity to help children be successful in school simply is not possible for some families (Books, 2004; Payne, 2008). In some families, both parents are working, sometimes uneven shifts and making ends meet is a continuous struggle. Children leave an empty house in the morning and come home to an empty house in the evening with no adult supervision and little or no accountability for school work. Most significantly, how a child performs in school is secondary to the daily routine of life, which is about dealing with poverty and the month to month finding and providing shelter, transportation, food and clothing (Books, 2004). In other families, alcoholism, drug abuse, domestic violence and other traumatic situations cause additional suffering for families and children. In these situations, all of the things educators expect of successful students take a back seat to the trauma that children deal with on a daily basis (Payne, 2005). Living in poverty is universally difficult but, in both rural and urban areas poverty is exacerbated by the very context of the place where people live.

Many minority children of poverty are not prepared for the expectations of school (Smith, 2004). No child can suddenly become responsible, clean, courteous, respectful, attentive, caring, and cooperative without being exposed to these types of behaviors during the first years of life. Many grow up in a world of drugs, pimps, lies, and fights (Upchurch, 1996). No one is checking their spelling, reading stories to them, or teaching them how to count. Often children of poverty will go to school without breakfast, clean clothes, or proper grooming. A child who is shunned (Upchurch, 1996) for being smelly, poor, and dirty is often fully aware of his predicament, but still has the same desire to be liked and accepted as any child. These students are not lacking in intelligence. They soon figure out the student with the freshly laundered clothes, neat hair, and charming smile, upon which the teacher lavishes attention, is white. Because they are not treated the same, they quickly associate white means good, and black means bad. Due to the experiences and perceptions, black males will stumble, fall, struggle, and get up. This is what it means to be an African
American male (Fletcher, 2007). Likewise, many suburban areas have become transitional and contain pockets of poverty.

**Rural Poverty**

Brown and Swanson (2003) argued that rural communities are no longer the romanticized pastoral, cohesive, friendly and unhurried places they were in the past. Rural communities are often very diverse and the similarities between rural and urban communities are multifaceted and complex. According to the United States Census, in comparison to Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSA’s), rural families have lower median income, a lower median family-household and per-capita incomes, higher poverty rates for families and individuals, and higher unemployment rates. Rural families are more often comprised single or divorced parents. Rural poverty more than likely involves the “working poor” and two-parent families. These families are typically less likely to receive public assistance or welfare and poverty is more likely to be of longer duration. The traditional support systems of rural children that included extended family and community members, are unfortunately, no longer available to support children as they were in the past. Grandparents are often working outside of the community, just as parents are, and have to commute back and forth to work (Brown & Swanson, 2003).

Dr. Christopher J. Herrick, a recent graduate of our doctoral program, has 25 years’ experience in K-12 education with 17 years as a school administrator. Chris is currently the Superintendent of Schools of the Fremont-Mills Community School District in Tabor, Iowa, and received his Doctorate in Education Administration from the University of Nebraska Omaha. Chris has a passion for at-risk students who are living in poverty. In his district, he is leading an advisory program with his faculty to help these students succeed. Chris, a rural superintendent, beautifully illustrated his understanding of rural poverty as he articulated the following interaction with a student:

In December 2002, I was in my second year as the superintendent of a small Midwestern rural school district. On this cold winter morning, just after the start of the school day, the elementary secretary called my office. Robert had missed the bus again, his grandmother could not get him out of bed and she didn’t know what to do with him. Robert was in the sixth grade and lived with his grandmother in a small house several miles from the school. Robert earned below average and failing grades and had a history of behavior problems in elementary school. From the educators’ perspective who worked with Robert, it appeared his grandmother didn’t know how to help Robert become successful with school. It appeared she did not know how to help him with academic work, and on many days, even how to get him to school. Robert struggled with school most of his young educational career, and now as a sixth grader was beginning to exert his stubbornness with his grandmother in getting out of bed and coming to school.

I told the secretary I would go get him and asked her to let his teacher know it would be a half hour or so before I could get back to the school with Robert. I drove the eight miles to the small village where Robert lived. The village has less than 200 residents most living in poverty, most of the homes in need of repair. When I arrived at Robert’s house, I got out of the car and walked
to the door. There were no sidewalks, only the dying grass of December and the mud from recent rains. There was no covered porch, no grand entry, and certainly no curb appeal. There were only the worn steps of cinder blocks leading up to the door of the run down home in which Robert and his grandmother lived.

This was poverty, not like urban poverty, but the kind of poverty found in rural farming communities. I was met at the door by Robert’s grandmother, cigarette in hand, the disheveled look of morning on her face. “I cannot get him up for school,” she said. I stepped inside and glanced around. There was some dog food strewn on the floor, an open bag of chips on the counter, overflowing ash trays among the clutter of dirty dishes in the kitchen, and a scattering of dirty clothes in the living room of this tiny, two bedroom home in need of significant repair. It was cold. In fact, it must have been less than 50 degrees in the house as I could see my breath when I spoke. I asked if they had heat. “No, it went out yesterday,” grandmother mumbled, “Someone is on the way to fix it today.”

On the living room floor was a torn stained mattress, Robert was under blankets among the clutter. Apparently grandmother managed to get him awake before I arrived. “Robert, you have to come to school,” I told him. He looked at me with no expression and with little emotion in his eyes. His grandmother yelled at him out of frustration to get up, he just stared up from under his blankets. I settled into an arm chair and told Robert I was not leaving until he got up, got dressed, and came to school with me. Finally he got up and went to a room in the back of the house. He returned wearing a basketball jersey and sweats. His hair was uncombed and obviously none of, what we consider to be, regular morning hygiene rituals were going to take place with Robert. But he was up and ready to come with me to school. We drove back to the school and on the way I asked him if he was hungry, assuming he had not eaten anything for breakfast. The small for his age boy nodded yes, he was hungry. It was perhaps the fact that at school, he would for sure get lunch and possibly get something for breakfast that actually motivated Robert to get up and come to school with me.

As we entered the school, we went to the kitchen and the cooks gladly gave Robert a breakfast bar and carton of milk. I checked him in with the secretary at the office, and Robert went to his sixth grade classroom for the day. As I walked back to my office, I thought to myself tomorrow may bring another morning trip to Robert’s house. Robert needed to be in school, I should be prepared to make the trip. Similarly, urban poverty is very difficult and like rural poverty, the context exacerbates the challenge of living in poverty.

**Metropolitan Poverty**

Most problematic of urban poverty is the impact on children and how the vicious cycle recreates itself overtime. The patterns of segregation and poverty emerge early in the life of a child and persist throughout the life-cycle and recreate themselves in subsequent generations. The location of our University is Omaha, Nebraska. Here the poverty rate of Black children is the 12th highest in the country with a rate of 44.6% in Omaha living in poverty. Amy, a doctoral candidate and urban principal observes an urban student in the school that she serves. Ms. Amy Welch has been a Dean of Students at Omaha Central
High School since 2006 and has served in the roles of Assistant Principal, mathematics teacher and network administrator in her previous experiences. She holds a Bachelor’s degree in secondary mathematics, a Master’s degree in Educational Leadership and is finishing her doctoral degree at the University of Nebraska Omaha in Educational Leadership. She is a fierce advocate for at risk students at Omaha Central. She wrote:

A student strolls into the building with his hood up, rap music blasting through his ear buds, texting on his phone. He ignores the security guard and teacher directing him to remove his hood and turn off the electronic devices. Undaunted he continues leisurely down the hall to his locker, removes his hoodie and hangs it up. He grabs his English book and saunters off toward the classroom. He enters the class ten minutes late. Unconcerned he meanders through the desks to his assigned seat and plops down. He does not open his book nor does he have pencil or paper. He is disconnected from class yet his face is tense almost daring the teacher to comment. She has learned to leave Brandon alone and continues with the lesson. He does not partake in the discussion because he has not read the book. He simply sits, counting off the minutes until the class is over. Motivated by anger and a profound sense of worthlessness, his behavior will become self-destructive and he will disengage from class and school (Upchurch, 1996; McMillian, 2004).

After months of working with Brandon and building trust, he finally opened up to what he faces. Not only is he dealing with the day-to-day of school and peers, but he is on a rollercoaster of emotions trying to fit into two culturally different worlds: school and community. It does not matter how messed up the members of his family are, they are still blood and that bond will transcend all good and bad. His mother is employed, but, off to the bars with her boyfriend as soon as work is done. His sister is busy with two young children and trying to finish high school. His brother is in jail for murder awaiting trial. Brandon is left in a house alone to fend for himself, no one around to ask about school or any other events in his life. There is no one there to make sure he is up in the morning and off to school on time or home at night and in bed at a decent time. Yet Brandon will defend each one of them because it is his family.

He has seen more in his short life than many see in their entire life. He knows how to navigate the streets, where to find drugs, the art of shoplifting, where to buy a gun and how to negotiate the courts. He knows about police profiling, and being interrogated about a friend involved in a crime. He knows about the local gangs and is tagged as a gang member even though he does not belong to a gang. He has been robbed of his childhood and innocence, forced to grow up years before his suburban peers. He has learned to survive the urban projects which are a battle zone like Vietnam, except he doesn’t get to leave after a tour of duty (Jones, Newman, Isay, 1997). Life in the hood can eat him up with its depressing and hopeless atmosphere. This ain’t no Wally and the Beaver! He survives and comes to school each day.

During those months, Brandon shared another side which many educators do not take the time to explore about their students. Inside his tough “bad boy” exterior is a normal adolescent with the same dreams as most majority students.
He desires to attend college and play football. He does not believe it is a possibility for him as no one in his family has gone to college. He quietly accepts the fact he will be working a minimum wage job instead of enrolling in college. Seeing his desire, I help him register for the ACT test, complete an entrance application for college, and apply for financial aid and scholarships.

A remarkable transformation starts to take hold when Brandon realizes someone cares enough to see his potential and help him reach for his dreams. He beams with pride when he shows me his acceptance letter. Two days later deflated, his pride is replaced with anger and frustration by police placing him in custody for questioning. In Brandon’s mind the events were like one of his favorite rap songs by Bone Thugs-N-Harmony “I try so hard . . . tried to get away but trouble follows me . . . . I’m taking five steps forward and ten steps back” (2007). I did not know the impact this one student was about to have on my perspective as I continued to help Brandon to strive to be successful in a white world. I learned first-hand some of the obstacles Brandon faced and began to understand why many of the hurdles continued to exist when, in my privileged mind, they seem so easy to avoid.

Many of America’s children live a harsh reality especially our African American males living in urban poverty. Each classroom in America’s urban public schools contains multiple stories, with any one story being enough to drop us to our knees. Her dad is strung out on dope. His brother was just sentenced to life in prison. Her uncle just died from AIDS. His cousin was shot last night in a drive by shooting. She was just beat by her mother’s drunken boyfriend. He has not eaten since he left school yesterday. He is living with his Aunt because his mother is in prison. She is leaving in a car down the street because the apartment complex she lived in has been condemned. For each face in the classroom there is a story. Educators need to build a relationship with their students and get to know the stories so they are able to understand that some days, like Brandon, just showing up is all these students are capable of handling. Like Brandon, many students show up seeking a place that is safe. Some will simply not be engaged.

**Transitional Suburban Poverty**

Dr. Anthony Weers has served as Assistant Principal of Westside High School in Omaha, Nebraska since 2007. He holds a Bachelors of Arts in K-12 Physical Education from Dana College, a Master’s Degree in Educational Leadership from Doane College and a Doctoral Degree from the University of Nebraska at Omaha in Educational Administration and Supervision. Tony is passionate about high school students and advocacy for their success. He has facilitated numerous Apple Computer and modular scheduling events where educators from across the world, Apple staff, and Westside schools staff collaborate and discuss the 1:1 Laptop program, educational technology and modular scheduling.

Tony, a principal in one of our diverse but more suburban settings studied instructional technology, and used his knowledge of the theoretical to uncover an important clue to understanding and serving families in poverty. Tony examined the impact of socioeconomic status of high school students participating in a one to one laptop computer program. He indicates that one of the potential solutions for mitigating the needs of
students struggling with poverty is through the use of instructional technology. Students participating in one-to-one laptop computer programs showed an increase in attendance, were more likely to engage in higher level thinking skills, reported working with academic content longer, and enjoying the learning process more, when they were given a chance to use instructional technology (Carter, 2001). In another study, Grandgenett (2008) found a correlation between the amount of time a student uses a computer and achievement.

To effectively improve the education and performance of students in poverty, educators must know which families are struggling with poverty. While he found no statistically significant difference between low socioeconomic status students and non-low socioeconomic status student achievement on the national percentile ranks, there was a consistent pattern of lower mean national percentile rank scores in all tests for the low socioeconomic status students. The best results for increasing the achievement of students in poverty comes from early identification and intervention from educators, community professional and caring families (Campbell & Ramsey, 1994; Conger, Long, & Latarola, 2009). At last, he indicates that every educator wants to see their students experience success, learn new things, and challenge themselves to do a better than they are currently doing. Educators must have a clear picture of what some of our poor and minority students are facing in their home environment. When a caring educator has a clear picture of the challenges faced by a student, and then has the privilege to provide resources and opportunities meet those challenges, great learning can take place. As more families struggle with poverty every day, educators must find a way to reach the students and families that need us the most (Weers, 2011).

**Ethnicity – Literature Review**

Racial composition of neighborhoods is at the heart of creation and destruction of communities. ‘Race’ is a defining characteristic of the opportunity structure of metropolitan areas. Squires and Kubrin (2005) noted “the linkages among place, race and privilege are shaped by three dominate social forces--- sprawl, concentrated poverty and segregation--- all of which play out in large part in response to public policy decisions and practices of powerful private institutional actors” (p. 48). The concentration of poverty shapes opportunities and lifestyles for example: health disparities may constitute the most concrete disadvantages associated with the spatial and racial divide in urban areas. Access to clean air and water, exposure to lead paint, stress, obesity, smoking habits, diet, social isolation, proximity to hospitals and availability of health insurance contributed to long-established disparities in health and wellness (Bullard, 1996; Dreier et al. 2001 pp. 66-82; Kingston & Nickens, 2001; Klinenberg, 2002).

While education has long been considered the great equalizer, property taxes are explicitly tied to place, and using property taxes to fund education are at the heart of the ongoing inequality in our nation’s schools (Squires & Kubrin, 2005). Furthermore, the demographics of metropolitan areas, spatial inequalities are readily translated into racial disparities (Anyon, 1997). After two decades of desegregating the nation’s schools, progress came to a halt in 1990’s and may have been reversed. Urban schools are typically “separate but unequal” (Logan, 2004) including fewer educational resources, less qualified teachers and highest teacher turnover and, ultimately, lower educational achievement in low-income and minority communities (Frankenberg et al., p. 67). Black-white housing


segregation is another factor that contributes to poverty in urban areas. Racial minorities tend to search for jobs in slower growing areas in central cities. Even worse, a job applicant’s address often has an independent effect that makes it more difficult for racial minorities from urban areas to seek employment. (Tilly et al, 2001; Wilson, 1996).

Crime remains concentrated in central cities and selected inner-ring suburbs. Race also has an impact here with black residents in urban areas experiencing a higher rate of violent crime than urban Whites in a majority of the cities (U.S. Department of Justice, 1999) Social problems long associated with older urban communities including acts of crime may be the result of segregation as it tends to concentrate poverty (Massay, 1995; Peterson & Krivo, 1993).

Ethnicity and Reading Achievement

Deficits in the reading achievement of urban poor students have been addressed through prescriptive and diagnostic measures institutionalized in research and pedagogy. Urban poor student learn differently and bring assets to the learning setting (Cox, Sproles, & Sproles, 1988). These assets include a collective consciousness, spirituality, communalism, cooperation, ethics, symbolic imagery, and strong interpersonal relationships (Bakari, 1997). School cultures that recognize bias in research and epistemologies embedded in the curricula; recognize cultural mismatch found in urban schools among teacher’ attitudes; urban student’ ways of learning; and also provide culturally proficiency training for teachers may improve the academic and reading achievement of urban poor students (Wells-Rivers, 2011).

Dr. Diane Wells-Rivers is currently serving as an Assistant Principal in Omaha Public Schools. She is passionate about cultural proficiency, curriculum leadership, lesson design and provides leadership in her district in the area of math and science education. Diane is a recipient of a Fulbright honor, the Jewel Jackson McCabe Scholarship and Honorable Mention Presidential Award for Excellent in Math Science Achievement. Dr. Wells-Rivers holds and B.S. in Elementary Education with a concentration in Black Studies, an M.S. in Elementary Education, a certificate in Urban Instruction and a Doctorate in Educational Leadership.

Diane, an urban principal, studied the effect of teachers’ cultural proficiency upon the reading achievement of sixth grade children. Her study concluded that adopting culturally proficient language instruction would likely take more than the two years that she devoted to her study. Students’ home language and their cultural linguistic experiences impact their academic vocabulary, learning and ability to conceptualize knowledge. Teachers need to be aware of the complexity of oral acquisition and the power of student’s home language in the area of self-identity, family bonds and bonding with peers. Urban teachers who teach a Standard English epistemology must be made aware of this complexity. The academic success of their urban student is dependent upon teachers who make connections between home language and school language acquisition and understand social dialects (Wells-Rivers, 2011).

In addition, Diane discovered that the continued use of culturally proficient staff development aligned with student reading achievement data and teacher quality. In addition to her achievement findings, Diane discovered that there was a reduction in office referrals for this grade level, improved teacher capacity, more student assistance team
meetings to address learning concerns, and an increase of meetings that looked at student growth. Further, she found that the data from successful teachers demonstrated that building on student’s strengths, knowing their interests, having highly engaging and culturally proficient lessons and understanding students’ developmental and cultural differences certainly leads to improvement. Last, Diane recommends that staff development choices by school officials be aligned with staff and student’s needs, school demographics and proven effectiveness based upon research. She also recommends that teacher education programs contain sufficient cultural proficient experiences to prepare students to teach in diverse environments. Knowledge of the social and cultural history is an important foundation for preparing culturally proficient teachers.

**Ethnicity and Gifted Young Black Men**

Dr. Dwayne Chism has served as Principal at LeMay Elementary School in Bellevue, Nebraska, since 2006. He is passionate about the underachievement of Black Males and other issues involving minority students. Dr. Chism holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Elementary Education, a Master of Science in Educational Administration and Supervision as well as an endorsement in 7-12 Educational Administration and a Doctoral degree in Educational Administration and Supervision with a Superintendent Endorsement.

Dwayne evaluated the 9-12 grade achievement trajectories of the same school district ethnic minority and ethnic majority high school students formally identified as gifted. He found that despite the legal and ethical agreement, that race and skin color should not matter; they very clearly do when examining the crisis of gifted minority underachievement (Atwater, 2008). There is a widely held opinion that advocated that school districts have a compelling interest in diversity and producing an educational environment that replicates the “pluralistic society” children live in upon graduation (Frey and Wilson, 2009). There are many theories that explain why minority students aren’t fully prepared to be immersed into the society upon graduation; theories on the effects of oppositional cultures, social and psychological issues, the effects of oppositional cultures, social and psychological issues, the effects of varying levels of teacher expectations, and issues with testing (Chism, 2011). The ability to conquer this challenge cannot be understated or overlooked. The manner in which the educational system responds to this challenge may very well determine the future of American society (Patton, 1997).

Dwayne’s study suggests that minority students who, based upon a standardized test, have shown a high academic performance capability have a readiness for rigorous courses in high school and can sustain high academic achievement over time when compared to non-minority peers. Therefore, the on-going question for many educators needs to be why doesn’t this hold true in many of our public schools across our country? Research dating back to 1989 indicated that as many as 50% of African-American students were performing below their promise, and gifted students represented 10 to 20 percent of high school dropouts (Ford, 1990). Consequently, two decades later, these statistics have changed very little. Dwayne’s study emphasizes the need for our schools to move into action by examining current practices and issues with the institution that are preventing equal opportunities for diverse learners. We must strive to save an endangered species, our gifted minority students, through the continual collection and analyzing of data, by providing positive role models, infusing multiculturalism into the curriculum, forming
support groups, fair testing assessments, and never to be overlooked…. We must provide them with teachers that instill hope.

**DISCUSSION**

Writing a dissertation is a lifetime achievement. It may take a few years and it will require intense focus and commitment. In order to be successful, one must have passion - something about which one cares about enough to completely and deeply focus on for months in order create a successful dissertation. With the skills, passion and dedication, then, an individual can write a quality dissertation. But, there is so much more underneath the surface. These students are all from middle class backgrounds and are dealing with poverty at a level that they have never personally experienced. They have developed an understanding over time to know the right way to help children and families that will matter in these dire circumstances. We believe that these phenomenal dissertations indicate that we are achieving our goal of sociocultural conscience leaders in our program. Their words alone demonstrate they have created a sense of hope and possibility for these students. They are compassionate, caring school leaders and we are proud of what they have become and the lives that they have significantly impacted.

The education community desperately needs more individuals capable of linking theory and practice (Butin, 2010). Applied or transitional research is crucial for improving education practices and policies; and yet it is very difficult to do well. Educators who are able to bridge the divide between academic research and daily practice, those who can bring ideas to life in their school districts are the types of leaders we need in our schools to bridge the gaps that we face with our most vulnerable students.

These students are aligning their actions with what they believe. Undertaking a dissertation is a significant action! Often, students in graduate programs fall back on what is comfortable and easy to express. In these cases the students followed uncomfortable journeys and looked deeply at their previously held assumptions and convictions. At times, students fear change and focus on short term measurement that doesn’t really matter. The students embraced change and focused on long term change. In fact, the dissertation served as a spring board to further study. We found that these students came out of the dissertation with many more questions than they came in with. They grew in their commitment and concern for children and sought new ways to impact change within their environments in order to better meet the needs of all children.

The first consideration in improving social justice is to strengthen the relationship between schools and communities. Further, educational leaders need to learn to take active roles that intervene on oppressive power differences that work to create schools that develop everyone’s capacity to think, to critique, and to carry out civil discourse about complex debatable issues. Leaders are stewards of the school and community and are engaged in revitalizing both to serve the needs of all children. Those who train future school leaders need to nurture the development of positive diversity dispositions in order to help all students succeed.

A dissertation is simply one view of an educator’s work – it is only one study, so how can it make an impact on social justice issues? The dissertation journey raises social awareness and by doing so, bridges the knowing and doing gap. The students’ whose dissertation selections that we have shared in this chapter all realize that what they have learned is influencing and impacting their work in both quiet and monumental ways.
Reviewing their dissertation work, gave our faculty members a view of the strength that lies within our program.

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